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SUBJECT: UGANDA: SAVE THE CHILDREN UGANDA ALLEGES ATTACK ON KARAMONJONG BY UPDF

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Save the Children Uganda, an auxiliary non-governmental organization (NGO) to Save the Children USA, released a report on an alleged Ugandan military attack in Karamoja that killed 66 children and 20 adults. At Save the Children USA's request, Save the Children Uganda shared the report with the Government on March 28. The report has been widely distributed before its public release on March 30. The military said that it engaged in a battle with Karamojong warriors who refused to disarm near Kotido and Abim in which 52 Karamojong warriors and 4 soldiers were killed. The military also refutes the report's claims that it has laid landmines in the region. Emboffs and DATT have urged the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) to use the report constructively and do a thorough investigation of the allegations.
End Summary.

BACKGROUND

¶12. (SBU) On March 28, Save the Children USA requested a meeting with Embassy officers and shared a copy of the Save the Children Uganda report which was to be made public on March 30. The report alleges that the UPDF, unprovoked, attacked a Karamoja kraal (a temporary settlement traditionally for Karamojong herdsman) in Kotido District. Reportedly, village adults, children, and elders from Apa Losiya were gathering to "greet" approaching UPDF. The report provided eyewitness accounts from some of the 256 people interviewed. However, the report does not include a UPDF account.

¶13. (SBU) The people of the Apa Losiya kraal allegedly had struck a protection deal with the UPDF in January. The deal reportedly soured when the villagers heard a rumor of a planned UPDF attack. The Karamajong believed the UPDF may have been trying to disarm them of the guns they had identified for the UPDF's disarmament program UPDF as a sign of good faith. The Losiya elders relocated the kraal without informing the UPDF to divert the rumored attack. When the UPDF was approaching on February 12, the Apa Losiya group claimed that they believed the UPDF may have wanted to discuss the original protection agreement and were anticipating a friendly visit.

¶14. (SBU) According to the report, on February 12, a child herder spotted the UPDF near Apa Losiya kraal. The community gathered and waited for the approaching UPDF. A village elder and young boy, who went to greet the soldiers, allegedly were shot. Eyewitnesses report that the UPDF opened fire on the gathered people who subsequently scattered, leaving many children and elderly behind. As the shooting continued, armored vehicles allegedly advanced. At 2:00 in the afternoon, a helicopter gunship is reported to have fired on Apa Lopus kraal (the site of the protection agreement discussions between the UPDF and the Karamojong in the area).

SAVE THE CHILDREN USA CONCERNS

¶ 15. (SBU) Save the Children USA requested a meeting with the Embassy officers to share the Save the Children Uganda report. Peter Nkhonjera, Country Director for Save the Children USA and Muluemebet Chekol, Deputy Africa Area Director told emboffs that they had called several diplomatic missions to express their concerns about the report. Chekol stated that the report was extremely one-sided. According to Chekol, Save the Children USA and Uganda are in the process of unifying into "Save the Children in Uganda," a process that will be completed later this year. Save the Children USA has finished an assessment of Karamoja that will be released in April. Nkhonjera was concerned that if the UPDF were ambushed by the report which contained unverified information, Save the Children's ability to work in Karamoja would be undermined.

¶ 16. (SBU) Peter Nkhonjera advised Save the Children Uganda to share the report with the GOU and UPDF to get their response prior to publication, which was set for March 30. Save the Children Uganda did share the report with Aston Kajara, the Minister of State for Karamoja on March 28. Kajara said he needed to consult the military, which he did on March 29. Kajara and the UPDF also met with Save the Children Uganda.

¶ 17. (SBU) Emboffs and DATT also shared the report with key government and military officials to obtain more information, hear the military's version of events, and to urge an investigation of the allegations. UPDF Spokesman Felix Kulayigye told P/E Chief that the Defense Minister Crispus Kiyonga would hold a press conference on March 31 on the military operations against the Allied Democratic Front rebels in western Uganda but would field questions about the alleged Karamoja incident. Privately, we have heard that senior UPDF officers were "outraged" by the report. Their immediate reactions included questioning why no elected local government leaders or parliamentarians raised the issue with the military.

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Second, the UPDF claimed that it has not had landmines in its inventory for over 16 years to refute allegations that it was mining the area.

¶ 18. (SBU) Kajara was investigating the Save the Children Uganda allegations. His first task was to clarify whether or not the Save the Children Uganda report was referring to a well-publicized clash on February 12 between Kotido and Abim. Kajara traveled with the Defense Minister and parliamentarians two weeks ago to look into complaints about that incident. The member of Parliament from Kabong, Simon Lokodo, accompanied Kajara and Kiyonga to meet with local leaders and victims of the attack. A number of children were killed during heavy fighting between the UPDF and the Karamojong warriors.

¶ 19. (SBU) Comment: We have impressed upon senior UPDF leaders, the Chief of Military Intelligence, and the GOU officials the importance of investigating the allegations. We will continue to seek accurate information regarding the report, but note that Save the Children USA's fear that it would be caught up in the controversy have materialized. International press reports were not distinguishing between the two organizations.

BROWNING